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ABSTRACT

A research team approach was selected for an ethnographic project to identify those variables that influenced the adult beginning readers' acquisition of reading strategies and their effect on reading achievement. Weekly staff meetings focused on (1) identifying initial conceptualization and emerging foci reflected in the data, and (2) continually adjusting the research roles to obtain a valid data base for the topic under study. The diversity evident within the team was especially emphasized in what each researcher initially noticed and in the questions each pursued upon returning to the investigative site. Several problems also arose with summary observations and interpretive asides that focused on teacher behaviors, general student behaviors and attitudes, and learning-to-read behaviors--the amount of student oral reading depended upon the teacher and not all researchers could code equally well the wider variations in reading behaviors. Establishing and maintaining the trust of the adult beginning readers was a continuous task. Perhaps the greatest cultural shock was the amount of planning required to use the diverse conceptual frameworks and skills of the researchers. Another cultural shock was that cooptation by the researchers and reverse cooptation by the center's staff produced different results. Nevertheless, the team approach did offer a means to resolve methodological issues, to use multiple research skills and roles, and to obtain a comprehensive data base. (HOD)

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1980 CULTURE SHOCK: EVOLVING ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCEDURES TO STUDY ADULT LEARNING-TO-READ BEHAVIORS

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1980 CULTURE SHOCK: EVOLVING ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCEDURES TO STUDY ADULT LEARNING-TO-READ BEHAVIORS

S. Schumacher and N. Boraks

During the eight months of observation, the research team developed ethnographic procedures in response to the culture of illiteracy and to the context complexity (Boraks, 1979) of several inner city adult learning centers. Although the research team had official access to the sites, the methodological problems were 1) gaining the trust of the participants, 2) structuring various research roles to obtain oral indices of the learning-to-read process, and 3) identifying the "silent languages" (Hall, 1955) in the field and emerging questions. Different members of the research team experienced waves (Guba, 1978) of cultural, role, methodological and conceptual shocks[1] during the year.

The ethnographic project[2] focused on identifying those variables which influenced the adult beginning readers' (ABR's) acquisition of reading strategies, i.e., visual, sematic, syntactic, idiosyncratic, and the effect on reading achievement. Before systematic observation began, five equivalent forms of word lists and paragraphs were developed to measure reading achievement of adults at less than third grade reading level. The validity and reliability studies of the Quick Progress Inventory were completed on adults in Virginia centers. The Quick Progress Inventory was administered periodically during the eight months of observation. Initial "foreshadowed problems"

(Malinowski, 1922) were focused on the teacher, the materials and the student.

This paper discusses methodological issues and procedures rather than the research findings of the project. The issues are limited to those at one adult learning center which attracted primarily black adults of low socio-economic status in their early twenties. References to other sites which contrasted in organizational patterns, classroom climate, instructional mode, and type of adult students will be made. This paper will demonstrate the value of a team approach in ethnography in gaining acceptance in the field, developing multiple research roles, and identifying emerging questions.

Using a Team Approach in an Ethnographic Study

The research team[3] was selected to provide different experiential, training, and conceptual orientations. One senior Investigator, a professor of reading, had tutored ABR's in centers and done previous research on adult reading. The other senior Investigator was a professor of educational research with an interdisciplinary orientation and a specialization in ethnography. One research assistant had a B.S. in sociology and had taught special education. The second research assistant had a B.A. in political science and was "new" to the field of education. Thus, one team member lacked teaching experience and two team members had only general knowledge of reading.

Weekly staff meetings were necessary for data collection by a team in contrast to four separate investigators. Staff meetings focused on two topics: a) identifying initial conceptualizations and emerging foci reflected in the data and b) continually adjusting the research roles to obtain a valid data base for the topic under study.

Diversity within the team became evident early in the project. During

the first month each senior investigator and research assistant observed the same class and then shared their field notes at a staff meeting. Even the method of taking field notes - lengthy paragraphs about a major event or an abstract concept with observations woven into the narrative or almost verbatim conversations and literal observations - seemed to reflect the different orientations of the team members. The summary observations and interpretative asides, especially in what each researcher initially noticed and in the questions to pursue upon returning to the site (Geer, 1964; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) emphasized the diversity.

For example, one researcher noticed the unrealistic goals of several ABR's such as "I'm gonna get my G.E.D. in a year." Student attitudes varied from being serious in learning to read to denying one's reading problem and fearing reading aloud before peers. One researcher easily identified each ABR's reading difficulties such as inability to say consonant sounds, retell a story in sequence, or use contextual cues to read. Another researcher focused on "instruction by improvisation," or lack of apparent sequential development of skills through class activities to meet student needs. Many ABR's appeared to attend this center for socializing purposes. The enthusiasm and energy spent in discussing money, family problems, job searches, boyfriends, and major news items tended to far outweigh that spent in learning. Another researcher noted the informality of the center and the class with its rationale that attendance and learning increases for adults when there is minimal school-like regulations. Few students were made aware of the serious implications of their lack of reading skills. Not one team member heard discussions which indicated reflective thinking about abstract ideas or the effect of partial literacy on their adult life. One researcher continually puzzled with such concepts as functionally literate, intellectually illiterate, aesthetic

isolationism.

Emerging foci required different kinds of data. Field notes and summary observations followed typical ethnographic procedures (Smith and Goeffrey, 1968; Whyte, 1955) as the research team became oriented to the site and participants. Observations were then focused on adult learning-to-read behaviors. The research team was instructed to record literally students' oral reading behaviors for miscue analysis. Because of the difficulty of both recording the book passage and simultaneously coding the student's reading, observers obtained copies of the text, coded in the book and then made xeroxed copies to attach to their field notes. Summary observations and interpretative asides focused on teacher behaviors, general student behaviors and attitudes, and learning-to-read behaviors.

Several problems arose with this procedure. First, the amount of student oral reading depended upon the teacher. If the teacher did not believe oral reading was important in learning to read, then few opportunities existed to obtain this data. Second, not all researchers could code equally well the wider variations in reading behaviors.

Even when oral reading was routinely done in tutoring, one researcher found it difficult to limit her observations to reading behaviors. The dilemma lay in the methodological implications of the level of abstraction and methods to be used in later data analysis. Ethnography, in contrast to other methodologies, allows for several levels of abstraction, from an almost behavioralistic time-series approach to middle-range and grand theory (Smith, 1978). Patterns may be identified through counting procedures (Becker, 1970) or qualitative analysis using retrospection, literature, analogies and imagery to convey meaning (Eisner, 1979).

Glasser and Strauss suggest in The Discovery of Grounded Theory (1967) the importance of changing research strategies to maintain the empirical focus within the constraints of naturalistic processes. Half-way through the study, a third procedure was tried to get valid oral indices of learning to-read behaviors. The Quick Progress Inventory was administered monthly and each student's oral reading of a word list and a paragraph was tape recorded. This procedure yielded on accurate record for miscue analysis. As questions continued to emerge, more tests were added to the Inventory. The adult was asked to retell the story, to tell a story about an accident they had experienced, and to take the P.S. Scale. Thus, other indices of comprehension, projective thinking, vocabulary, and sequential or logical thinking were sought.

Ethnographic observations continued at the adult learning center with the focus now on student learning behaviors, peer interaction, and teaching procedures. The taped Quick Progress Inventory was used for analysis of reading miscues and thinking processes. The qualitative ethnographic data was used to verify each student's reading strategy, identify related variables, and describe life at one adult learning center.

Perhaps the greatest cultural shock the team experienced in contrast to the lone anthropologist in a foreign society was the amount of planning required to use the diverse conceptual frameworks and skills of the four researchers. Skills included entry into the field, acceptance at the site, and operating at different levels of abstraction in observation, recording and questioning. The richness of the data suggests the advantages of using a team approach in ethnographic research.

Access versus Acceptance in the Field

Establishing and maintaining the trust of the ABR's was a continuous task (Guba, 1980). Official access to the center was easily obtained. One senior Investigator and the center Director explained orally to the ABR class the research project and the role of the four observers. The initial student reaction was disinterest, curious, threatened, and suspicious. This was perhaps justified by the impression given that four observers from the university would be present in a class where daily attendance ranged from five to twelve students.

Gaining acceptance at the center was a team effort. The researchers dressed very casually to blend in with the participants. Procedures to minimize the differences between the educational levels of the students and researchers were used, i.e. unobtrusively writing in small notebooks. Student names and brief personal information were deliberately memorized to facilitate conversations. Seldom would an ABR talk to a researcher unless the observer spoke his/her name first in a friendly manner. Researchers acknowledged they could not read everything in print, praised achievement by students, and empathasized with the teacher. Only one researcher was scheduled to observe per period to avoid the appearance of too many authority figures or learned strangers in the ABR class.

Each researcher used different procedures to gain acceptance at the center. One research assistant, initially seen as the word list tester and later seen as "the lady who takes notes and who likes to listen to you read" realized that the ABRs' regardless of the official explanation of the project, were unsure of her role. In time, she defined her role as a reading helper by initiating assistance during class study time. The second research assistant who more easily blended in the ABR's because of his appearance, never forced

his presence on an individual but always responded in an interested and concerned manner. The senior Investigator who contrasted in appearance markedly from the group and who observed less often than the other researchers was viewed solely as an observer by ABR's This limited the potential data base and the senior Investigator shifted to observe tutoring sessions.

All research team members found that with these adults, the process of being accepted was time consuming and had to be approached on an individual basis. Although not the only factor, consistent time in the field promoted stable relationships. When a substitute taught the class for a week, the ABR's asked one research assistant to be their teacher next year since they knew their regular teacher would be working elsewhere.

As new students joined the class, the "regulars" legitimized the presence of the observer. However, the adults continued to have different reactions to the notetaking and to the Quick Progress Inventory. Some students reminded the observers that "I don't like you to write down everything I say" while other students stated that the researchers "pick through my mind" to help them learn. The initial reaction to the Quick Progress Inventory was one of nervousness and fear. By the third testing, about eighty percent of the adults looked forward to the Inventory, liked the appreciation expressed by the researcher for their cooperation, and when they recognize their own progress, wanted to show the results to their teacher.

The culture shock for the research team was two fold. Each researcher had to acquire the ABR's trust in a manner which was a sincere expression of herself/himself as a person in a role the ABR's were familiar with. Official approval or rational explanations of the project and the observer were not sufficient. The ABR's could recognize and respond to the roles of tutor,

teaching assistant and tester but not that of strictly observer.

Unlike previous ethnographic research in elementary classrooms and other educational agencies (Schumacher, 1972, 1975) these adults continued to interact with the research team in contrast to ignoring or forgetting the observer's presence. This may have been due to the fluid student population and the informal classroom atmosphere. However, the topics of conversation were usually those of the ABR's. Subtle efforts to steer conversations were unsuccessful. It was important to note what was discussed as well as what tended to be ignored.

Using Cooptation and Reverse Cooptation to Obtain Data: Multiple Research Roles

Cooptation was one procedure to obtain valid data. Research roles were influenced by the students, teacher, and center Director. The Director stated early in the project her role expectations for the research team: the four researchers were viewed as an "extra pair of hands." The team would serve as tutors and resource persons if the ABR's requested help in reading. The researchers responded to all student requests but did not become a tutor to any single student. However, the danger of being coopted into this role was always present (Guba, 1980). Further, the Director felt the research team should provide incentives, i.e. a Christmas party, field trips, for the ABR's cooperation. This was not done.

Cooptation was deliberately structured for two research roles. One researcher sat in the carrell room in the role of resource person with an unobtrusive tape recorder. This role did not materialize because three assistants were usually in the carrell room moving from one carrell to the next helping students.

Perhaps the best example of cooptation was establishing an evening ABR class with the research assistant who had no previous teaching experience as the teacher and a senior Investigator as the observer. Thus, an inside/outside technique similar to Whyte and "Doc" (1955) and to Smith and Geoffrey (1968) was used. The senior Investigator's notes were extremely rich data although the researcher-teacher could only sporadically summarize a class session. No attempt was made to direct the researcher's instruction. However, the effect of the teaching experience on the research assistant was a high level of consciousness, observation, and concentration on the evolving research topic. (Eisner, 1979). This yielded provocative insights and questions in areas of instruction, group dynamics, sequential learning, risk-taking skills of ABRs', cues to frustration levels, the meaning of relevancy to these ABRs.

The researchers also attempted "reverse cooptation" with the ABR teacher and several tutors. Reverse cooptation is encouraging the teacher or tutor to try out different instructional techniques or materials and to analyze the results in terms of the evolving research questions. This contrasted to manipulation of a single variable to measure the experimental effect on the dependent variable. The teacher was encouraged to have more group oral reading and discussion. She was asked to send each student out of the room during independent reading to read aloud to a research assistant who would code from the textbook. The ABR teacher changed her instructional approach; however, group activities were on vocabulary and skills and individual activities were in workbooks. The ABR teacher seemed less concerned about the evolving research questions than the solution to immediate instructional problems. Reverse coptation was successful with tutors who weekly tape recorded their sessions with each ABR and discussed the sessions with a researcher.

Multiple research roles were also required because of the instructional program of the center which differed in several respects from previously studied adult learning centers (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox, 1975). By mapping (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) the adult learning center, one discovered that instruction was not limited to the hour class period but also occurred in various learning niches (Barker and Gump, 1964) at different times from 8:45 to 11:00 a.m. These learning niches were a) carrells where students practiced with tapes and workbooks, b) individual tutoring with volunteer paraprofessionals, c) individual tutoring with the ABR teacher, d) monthly student-teacher conferences to review progress and set goals, e) conferences to review standardized test results, and f) field trips. Because of the multiple learning niches within a single site, researchers were assigned to observe different niches to obtain the "totality" of the instructional process (Schumacher, 1979). Each learning niche required different degrees of participation from complete participant to complete observer (Gold, 1958) and specific skills in the research role.

The cultural shock was that cooptation by the researchers and reverse cooptation by the center's staff produced different results. When attempting to gather both accurate records through taping and more traditional ethnographic data through non-interfering observation of natural processes without research control, multiple research roles seem necessary. Flexibility and skills within each role and across roles were essential.

Identifying the "Silent Languages" in the Field and Emerging Questions

E.T. Hall suggested with the concept of "silent language" that verbal languages and behavior were interrelated and learned through one's culture. He defined silent language as the "elaborate patterning of behavior which

prescribes our handling of time, our special relationships, our attitudes toward work, play, and learning. In addition to what we say with our verbal language we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent language - the language of behavior" (p. 15, 1959). Ethnography provided the research method to investigate the possibility.

After a month in the field, the team began to identify multiple language foci in the learning center. Indices of the language of the learning-to-read language or instruction were quickly recognized. The learning-to-read language occurred when Ralph read cookies without contextual cues as cooks, cooking, cookies, demonstrating visual and phonological strategies. Examples of the language of instruction were "I got really hot about it! She scored my test wrong!" or loudly stating before the group "This book's too easy for me!" or "Still, when I go home, I can't pick up nothin' and read it." However, another language of literacy began to emerge in the field notes such as "Junie, stay off my back! I've got enough to worry about! I put one child off to school this mornin' and I'm carryin' another un righ' hear," pointing to her obviously pregnant figure. Ronnie said "I've four licenses - barber's shoe repair, and woodshop assistant even though I ain't workin' now." Carlton told the tutor, "we read about the law yesterday and..." Robert interrupts with "how to bust somebody and what to say to the cop--when you see the man!" This language seemed to serve a socializing function. Thus, the research sought to derive meaning from the multiple and silent languages (Hall, 1973) of literacy.

The three language foci, i.e. learning-to-read language, language of instruction and socialization language, continued to interplay in the field notes throughout the eight months of observation. Although these multiple

languages appeared analytically discreet, in reality they were intertwined. For example, Joyce read "he have a" for "he has a." Michael spoke "book-talk" when he read aloud but retold the story in socializing language, substituting the word rumble for fight.

Variables which influenced the miscues of these ABR's initially identified were: peer behavior, textual constraints, teacher, perception of how one learns, previous teacher, text skills, experience with print outside the center, attitude toward risk-taking, views of reading, language, mental agility. However, a tentative taxonomy or schematic identification of variables is merely the first step in the search for deeper meanings.

More questions arose regarding the interrelationships of variables which seem to influence the reading behavior. For example, why do some adults consistently use syntactic cues in oral reading? Why do some adults retell a story based on their personal experience instead of what they accurately read orally? Why do most ABR's exhibit only concrete thinking in contrast to abstract reasoning? Why is there consistently a lack of ABR's conversation on ideas derived from reading, asking speculative questions or puzzling about abstract concepts? How does being overwhelmed with experiential reality effect the learning-to-read process for an adult? One could continue adinfinitum.

Initial concepts used for this study were drawn from 1) reading theories (i.e. psycholinguistics, information processing, perceptual theories); 2) sociology (i.e. group processes, roles, norms); 3) anthropology (i.e. multi-cultural language, dialects, and customs); and 4) adult learning theories. The cultural shock was in the conceptual complexity of this microscopic observation and analysis of ABR's learning-to-read behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a team approach to an ethnographic study of ABR's learning-to-read behaviors in an inner city adult learning center provided some advantages compared to a single observer. Research team members were selected for their different experiential, training, and conceptual orientations. To function as a team required time and planning. Each researcher gained acceptance in the field when he/she approached individual ABR's students as a person in a role which ABR's could respond to, i.e., tutor, assistant, tester. Cooptation and reverse cooptation yielded different results for data collection. Multiple research roles were necessary to obtain taped data which could be statistically analyzed and qualitative observation data of naturalistic processes. Conceptual complexity of these ABR's learning-to-read behaviors surfaced as concepts from theories of reading, sociology, anthropology and adult learning were tried for explanatory power.

The ethnographic study of ABR's produced cultural, role, methodological and conceptual shocks for various research team members. The team approach was a means to resolve methodological issues, to use multiple research skills and roles, and to obtain a comprehensive data base.

Footnotes

1. The term "shock" is borrowed from the writings of Alvin Toffler, Future Shock.

2. This project was funded under Section 310 of the Adult Education Act, Title VI, P.L. 89-750 through the Virginia Department of Education Adult Education Services.

3. Many of the insights in methodology and reading behaviors were provided by the research assistants: Marilyn Finn and Andrew Wainer.

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